

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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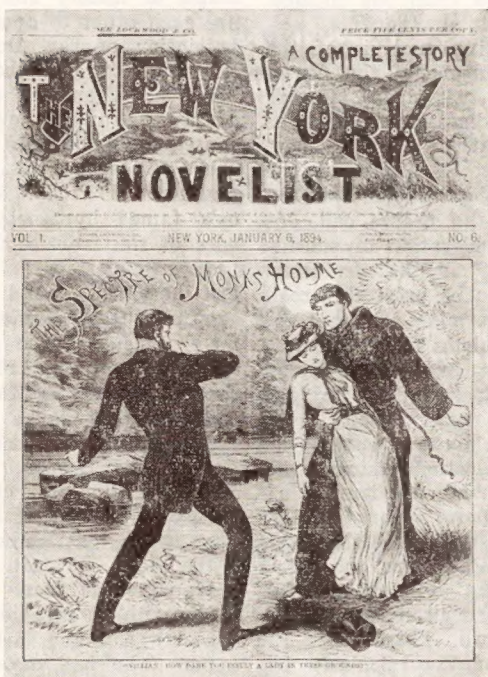
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## The Dime Novel As An Historian's Tool

Conclusion

By William A. Settle, Jr.



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THE NEW YORK NOVELIST

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# The Dime Novel As An Historian's Tool

## Conclusion

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Professor Curti's characterization of the dime novels with regard to the relation of their themes to the American tradition was accompanied by implicit challenges to historians. He commented:

The relationship between "high-brow" and "lowbrow" literature must be better understood before we can attack one of the major problems in American culture, that of the transit of ideas, attitudes, and tastes not merely from Europe to America and from one locality to another, but also from one cultural and class level to another.<sup>20</sup>

A brief comparative analysis of the two types of literature of the American Revolution exemplified Curti's point. His concluding statement was even more provocative:

Any thoroughgoing study of the American tradition as cherished by the masses of the people calls, of course, for consideration of sub-literary fiction of all periods. Dime novels could also be profitably read in order to determine attitudes towards other problems in our cultural history, as, for example, popular notions of "book-learning," foreigners, "inferior" races, wealth and "success." Certainly the student of social and intellectual history who tries to understand the transit of ideas from the more favored to the less favored, must examine the dime novels. These fragile, rare, and highly fugitive books will be useful likewise to anyone interested in proletarian literature. They must be taken into account particularly by those interested in the democrati-

zation of culture and the commercialization of leisure, in the rise and reinforcement of our traditions of adventure and rugged individualism, in the development of class consciousness, and in the growth of American patriotism and nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

Another distinguished scholar who has studied a sampling of Beadle's dime novels is Professor of English Henry Nash Smith. His "Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth"<sup>22</sup> was acclaimed as a rare example of history and literature serving each other to create a critical appreciation of the American heritage. His study "traces the impact of the West . . . on the consciousness of Americans and follows the principal consequences of this impact in literature and social thought" to the formulation of Frederick Jackson Turner's famed hypothesis of the influence of the frontier in American history. The Western hero and the Western heroine, around each of whom Smith built a chapter, are the dime novel Western hero and heroine. He found the number of "more or less exact replicas" of Cooper's Leatherstocking was large, and he established strong connecting links between Cooper and Beadle's early Westerns. But with time this changed:

By 1877, when [Edward L.] Wheeler began his Deadwood Dick series, the Wild Western hero had been transformed from a Leatherstocking with an infallible sense of right and wrong and feelings . . . into a man who had once been a bandit, and who even after his reforma-

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tion could not easily be distinguished from the criminals opposing him. Cut loose first from the code of gentility that commanded Cooper's unswerving loyalty, and then from the communion with God through nature that had made Leatherstocking a saint of the forest, the Western hero had become a self-reliant two-gun man who behaved in almost exactly the same fashion whether he were outlaw or peace officer. Eventually he was transformed into a detective and ceased in any significant sense to be Western. The heroine, undergoing an even more drastic evolution when she was freed from the trammels of gentility, developed at last into an Amazon who was distinguished from the hero solely by the physical fact of her sex.<sup>23</sup>

Professor Smith commented that production by formula stripped "from the writing every vestige of the interest usually sought in works of imagination." Although entirely sub-literary, the "work tends to become an objectified mass Dream" in which the "writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers." Smith saw the "presumably close fidelity of the Beadle stories to the dream life of a vast inarticulate public" as the factor which makes them of value to the social historian, but he thought frenzied competition among publishers destroyed this value in the late dime novel period.<sup>24</sup>

Historians have used the dime novel as a tool but hardly to so lofty a degree as Professor Curti suggested. Three examples, all of which concern the mixture of legend with history, will be noted in the order of their publication.

Serious historians who have dealt with the life of William F. Cody, or Buffalo Bill, have had to study the dime novel as a source of the legend of the making of Buffalo Bill. Don Russell has come the nearest to a definitive work in his "The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill."<sup>25</sup>

More dime novels concerned Buffalo Bill than any other real person. Twen-

ty authors wrote some 557 Buffalo Bill dime novels which were printed and reprinted for a total of 1700. In addition twenty-two were signed by Buffalo Bill as author and reprinted to make a total of forty-seven issues. Russell thinks Cody wrote some of these. Of the fictitious heroes, only one, Nick Carter, figured in more dime novels than Buffalo Bill. So many Buffalo Bill dime novels were written that they bore less relation to reality than those about other historical characters. But Russell concluded: "The dime-novel Buffalo Bill never crumbled into the dust of the pulp paper he was printed on. He still exists, a very real part of the American tradition."<sup>26</sup>

Another and very perceptive use of the dime novel as the historian's tool is Professor Kent L. Steckmesser's "The Western Hero in History and Legend"<sup>27</sup> in which he deals with four western heroes: Kit Carson (Mountain Man); Billy the Kid (Outlaw); Wild Bill Hickok (Gunfighter); and George Armstrong Custer (Soldier). Steckmesser presents first, in the case of each hero, the evidence of history regarding him and then traces the development of the legend surrounding the hero. His analysis of the legend-making process is a significant contribution to the understanding of Western history and its heroes. The dime novel figured significantly in the growth of the Carson and Custer legends.

My own "Jesse James Was His Name"<sup>28</sup> is a third study of a legend in which research in the dime novel was essential. Frank Tousey's "Five Cent Wide Awake Library" first printed a James band story in 1881, twenty-one years after the dime novel began and a year before Jesse was killed. It is difficult to determine how many separate James novels there were due to the changing of titles when stories were reprinted, but nearly six hundred issues have been accounted for.<sup>29</sup>

A few of these dime novels are in the nature of the so-called histories of the James band. But most of them are works of fiction that merely take their cue from real persons and events.



Unusual shooting ability, courage in the face of danger, willingness to aid the unfortunate, deference to women, and ability to surmount all obstacles are common characteristics of the dime novel Jesse James. The Pinkertons and detectives in general did not fare well at the hands of these authors. Nothing was too mean for Jesse to do to an enemy, particularly a detective. It is difficult to judge the effect on the readers of this strange mixture of ingredients. Undoubtedly it helped sustain the legend if it did not contribute to it.

One could easily propose a long list of themes in the American tradition that could become the basis for research in the dime novel. Certainly such a list would vary from the things that interested Professor Curti in 1937 in that it would reflect concerns of today. For example, much is being said today in explanation of the violence in American society, and a "History of Violence in America" was prepared by scholars from various disciplines as an official report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.<sup>30</sup> It has a short chapter on violence in literature and folk lore, but there is no mention of the relation of violence in sub-literary fiction to the acceptance of violence as a part of American life. This theme could well be studied.

This essay should not be concluded without some comment on a group of people who become important aids to any dime novel researcher. They are the collectors, and sometimes dealers, of these rare items. Since 1931 the "Dime Novel Round-Up" has been published, first edited by Ralph F. Cummings of Fisherville, Massachusetts, and now edited by Edward T. LeBlanc of Fall River, Massachusetts. Although written mainly by and for collectors, the "Round-Up" is indispensable. It can be a guide to both private and public holdings. In January, 1959, thirteen of its 216 subscribers were university and other libraries;<sup>31</sup> ten years later in January, 1969, forty-seven of its subscribers were in that category.<sup>32</sup> This increase indicates growing recognition of the

"Round-Up's" significance.

The collectors who come from many walks of life can truly be called a rare breed because of their absorbing interest in and devotion to the discovery and preservation of not alone the physical remains but data about authors and publishers. Two will be noted here.

The first is the late Albert Johannsen, professor of geology at the University of Chicago and renowned scientist in his own right, who collected over 7,000 publications of the House of Beadle and Adams. His compilation of information about the history of the Beadle company, list of its publications, information about the firm's authors, and illustrations from his collection fill two huge volumes published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1950.<sup>33</sup> Shortly before his death Professor Johannsen completed an addendum correcting errors and adding information which was published in 1962 as Volume III.

A second collector who illustrates well the fun these people have is Gerald J. McIntosh of Little Rock, Arkansas. In one of his many articles in the "Dime Novel Round-Up" he explains that as a boy he read as many of the Merriwell stories by Gilbert Patten published in the "Tip Top Weekly" as he could obtain, and as an adult he finally acquired and read all 987 issues. He also had read the works of Charles Dickens and his study of the Merriwell story content convinced him that Charles Dickens was Patten's favorite author and that "David Copperfield" was the book he loved above all others.<sup>34</sup>

McIntosh also followed the Jim Williams cartoons—"Out Our Way," "Worry Wart," "Heroes Are Made, Not Born," "Why Mother Gets Gray," "The Bull of the Woods," "Born Thirty Years Too Soon," and "Moments We'd Like To Live (and Wouldn't Like to Live Over) Over"—for evidence of the dime novel influence in the cartoons. He filled a half dozen large scrapbooks with Williams' cartoons and then gave them to the Western Heritage Center Library at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Okla-

home City.<sup>35</sup> McIntosh has given his dime novel collection and related materials to the University of Arkansas Library. Can the historian ask for more? Johannsen and McIntosh symbolize the dozens of collectors without whose efforts the dime novel could not be an historian's tool.

#### NOTES (continued)

19. Merle Curti, "Dime Novels and the American Tradition," *The Yale Review*, XXVI (June, 1937), 761-778.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 773.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 778.

22. Henry Nash Smith, "Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

25. Don Russell, "The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 386-415.

27. Kent L. Streckmesser, "The Western Hero in History and Legend" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

28. William A. Settle, Jr., "Jesse James Was His Name" (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966).

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 187-190.

30. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., "The History of Violence in America" (New York, Toronto, London: Bantam Books, 1969).

31. "Dime Novel Round-up," 27 (January 15, 1959), 2-8.

32. *Ibid.*, 38 (January 15, 1969), 6-11.

33. See reference note 1 above.

34. Gerald J. McIntosh, "The Influence of Charles Dickens on Gilbert Patten." "Dime Novel Round-Up," 35 (October 25, 1966), 103-107.

35. Gerald J. McIntosh, "Dime Novels in Cartons," "Dime Novel Round-Up," 36 (January 15, 1967), 2-5.

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Where lurked savage hostile redskins,  
And road agents on every mountain  
crest.

And ferocious wild beasts roamed this  
land  
Ready to pounce upon a foe to kill;  
This was the Wild West,  
The scout was Buckskin Bill.

In the Beadles Dime Novels  
There was thrilling exploits on every  
page;  
Redskins were scalping palefaces  
And road agents were holding up  
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These dime novel tales were exciting,  
They were filled with real thrill;  
Colonel Prentiss Ingraham was the  
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Dime Novels  
His adventures were filled with Wild  
West Thrill  
He was always on guard and alert,  
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search,  
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The scout was a living character.  
In these dime novels of real thrill  
He galloped through these exciting  
tales,  
The scout was Buckskin Bill.

The scout galloped through the  
Beadles Dime Novels,  
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still  
On the lookout for redskins and road  
agents;  
The scout was Buckskin Bill.



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By J. Edward Leithead

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I cannot tell exactly how many accounts of the Little Big Horn I have read (never tiring of it) nor how many pictures of it I have seen and studied, but Don Russell, who gave us "The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill" and later, in 1968, "Custer's Last," has, with his usual untiring thoroughness, come up with an amazing book, "Custer's List, A Checklist of Pictures Relating to the Little Big Horn."

Not only are all the paintings of various artists' versions of that never-forgotten fight fully accounted for (as far as identifying the artists is possible), but drawings, usually in color, in comic books, dime novels, on bubble gum cards and many other sources you wouldn't know about except for Don Russell's efforts to catalogue every item that exists, even Custer dime novels that do not feature the big battle.

To bring all this vastly interesting and important data together in one book (stiff paper covers, with illustration from a sketch by Alfred R. Waud on front cover), is a triumph in intensive research, the kind that Cody and Custer buffs have come to expect of Don Russell and are never disappointed.

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Printed by offset from typewriter, p. 88, "Custer's List" was published by the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, P. O. Box 2365, Fort Worth, Texas, 76101, issued in an edition limited to 300 copies. The book sells for \$5.00 and is available from the museum at the above address. I know that all Custer buffs will want to own a copy and I suggest they send for it without delay.

## RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS

GOOD OLD DAYS, Tower Press, Inc. 25 Garden St., Danvers, Mass. 01923. 35c. October 1970 Issue. STRIVE AND SUCCEED, Horatio Alger and His Times, by Herb L. Risteen. A thumb nail biography of Alger with a short discussion of his works.

DES MOINES REGISTER, June 9, 1970. OVER THE COFFEE column. ALL-AMERICAN BART HODGE, by Jack Smith. Reviews the Merriwell stories from very little actual knowledge. Concludes that Bart Hodge because he had some defects was the real All-American boy.

## NEWS NOTE

A one-act play "True Friends" by Stephen Press has been added to the required reading list for graduate students taking a course in theater arts at Penn State. The play, which has had several performances in the New York area, has been incorporated into the study program in Penn State's Theater course in children's theater. The play is concerned with the social adjustments of young teenagers. Mr. Press is a member of the Roundup and his play is based on the Merriwell stories.

## FOR SALE

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- 228 E. C. Toewe, Box 429, Rt. 1, Apollo, Pa. 15613 (new address)
- 207 Stephen Press, Dutchess County Community College, Pendell Rd., Poughkeepsie, N. Y. 12600 (new address)
- 337 Frederick G. Ruffner, Jr., Box 5156, Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich. 48236  
(new member)
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## Rockwood, Roy

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## Sabin, Edwin L.

Pluck on the Long Trail. Thomas Y. Crowell, Pub.  
Good condition, cover faded ----- 2.00

## Nick of the Woods; or, The Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky

by Robert Montgomery Bird. W. J. Middleton, Pub. 1873.  
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## Ellis, Edward S.

True Blue, Dana Estes & Co. 1903. 1st ed. Good condition ----- 3.00  
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